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The Practice of Dhikr Among Senegalese Taalibe Baay Women: Individual Devotion, Communal Well-Being

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Abstract

For Sufis, *dhikr*—the practice of invoking the Name of God—pervades the fabric of everyday life.[1] For Taalibe Baay (disciples of Ibrahim Niasse) living in Senegal, *dhikr* takes on particular significance in relation to the experience of *tarbiya*, an intense spiritual initiation aimed at achieving a vision of God. If *tarbiya* is the door to the spiritual path, some Taalibe Baay say, then *dhikr* is a tool by which disciples can continue to progress along this path, purifying themselves internally and reaffirming their connection to God each time they perform these prayers. But for some Senegalese Taalibe Baay women, *dhikr* seems to function not only as this

[1] M.M. Dheen Mohamed, "Muslim Prayer in Practice," in *Prayer*, ed. David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 29-30.

kind of spiritual tool, but also as a practice for stabilizing one's emotional and mental well-being. In this sense, it becomes less of a mandated religious practice and more of a personal need. The internal changes that such a continual practice inspires in individuals is palpable; they begin to radiate a selfless, unconditionally kind energy. In this way, the internal betterment that individuals experience as a result of performing *dhikr* has a ripple effect on the entire *daaira,* or Taalibe Baay community. Because of the purifying effects of *dhikr* on an individual level, the *daaira* becomes a community in which working for the sake of others' comfort—especially as a woman—is expected. This work, in turn, can be understood as a form of worshipping God. By drawing on the experiences articulated by the Taalibe Baay women I interviewed, in conjunction with existing literature on *dhikr, daairas*, the Sufi spiritual path, the inner and outer life, and the role of women in the Niassen *tariqa,* I intend to make comparisons between these firsthand accounts and the scholarly discourse, framing my research in terms of the question, How do Senegalese Taalibe Baay women engage with the practice of *dhikr*? Ultimately, I aim to honestly present the experiences a handful of Senegalese Taalibe Baay women shared with me, focusing on the ways in which they drew connections between their individual devotional practice of *dhikr* and their community lives.

Ethics

In order to ensure ethical interactions with all research subjects, I adhered to a standard procedure of obtaining informed consent with my interviewees. Before beginning the informed consent procedure, I asked for consent to record. Once I began the recording, I obtained oral consent from the interviewees. All interviewees that gave their consent were informed of the scope and goals of my project, the planned duration of the interview, their right to end their

participation at any time or withhold responses to questions, that their identity would remain confidential, and that the interview recordings would be deleted from my phone after the completion of my research.

Throughout my collection of data through the observer as participant method, I aimed to conduct research ethically by behaving in contextually appropriate ways, including veiling myself and remaining in designated sections for women. I also obtained informed consent from involved parties when appropriate.

It is important to note the role that language barriers played in my interviews. While all participants expressed that they were comfortable conducting the interview in the language we agreed upon (whether that was English, French, or Wolof), sometimes we chose the language based on mutual convenience (i.e., because I speak French, many interviews that may have otherwise been conducted in Wolof were conducted in French). Several of the interviewees whom I interviewed in French expressed to me that they had the words for a particular concept in Wolof, but not in French. Some thoughts, then, may have been lost in translation. I took measures to minimize this kind of loss by working with a translator when interviewees expressed they were most comfortable speaking in Wolof, and by recording words and phrases in Wolof for later translation when interviewees expressed to me that they did not have the words for a particular concept in French or English.

While I will refer back to the role of my positionality within my research throughout my presentation of findings, it is worth offering a more substantive statement on that subject here. Since my way of thinking about my positionality developed throughout my research primarily in relation to my research subjects, I will first explain the reasoning behind the demographic I chose to interview. I chose to interview Taalibe Baay women chiefly in order to gain a better

understanding of their experiences and, in doing so, increase my respect for their community. Since the official discourse on Sufism in Senegal often remains male-centered, I wanted my research to shed light specifically on the experiences of women, and it seemed to me that Taalibe Baay women were among the most vocal and visible Sufi women in Senegal. I aimed to collect data from a realistic sample of this demographic by interviewing women of a range of ages and with a range of degrees of involvement within their religious communities. However, my chief goal was not to capture a "realistic sample," per se, but to convey the experiences of individual women with integrity, with the ultimate aim of learning a little bit about how each of my interviewees conceived of her identity.

Apart from examining my reasons for choosing this particular demographic for my research, it is essential that I reflect on the implications of conducting religious research on a community of which I am not a part. In this vein, it is important to remember that the history of the field of religious studies is bound up with the history of colonialism. Entering communities with which one is unfamiliar to "discover" their religious beliefs and practices not only positions these communities as an exotic and primitive "other," but also inevitably misconstrues the lived reality of these communities according to researchers' own backgrounds and reference points. J.Z. Smith reflects on the pitfalls of comparative religious studies as an academic discipline in his work, *Imagining Religion*,[2] in which he argues that religious researchers that enter communities foreign to them inevitably convey these communities according to their own experiences, ultimately identifying similarities that may or may not exist in reality. In this process, "something 'other 'has been encountered and perceived as surprising either in its similarity or dissimilarity to what is familiar 'back home,'" and this results in a "…subjective

[2] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

experience [being] projected as an objective connection…."[3] Ultimately, Smith urges his readers to remember that, when it comes to religious scholarship, "…comparison is, at base, never identity."[4] While my project is not of an explicitly comparative nature, Smith's argument remains relevant. Given that the subject of my research is a community to which I do not belong, my own life experiences will necessarily influence what I perceive as noteworthy about this community. Ultimately, these circumstances mean that there is a risk of my presenting Taalibe Baay women in a way that is out of touch with their lived realities.

The presence of this risk in my research is twofold. To begin with, my appearance as an outsider (a White, non-Muslim American student) undoubtedly influenced the way in which my interviewees presented their responses to me. This kind of phenomenon is inevitable in research, but remains important to keep in mind. Perhaps more importantly, though, my identity a non-Muslim surely limited my ability to understand the thoughts and experiences my interviewees shared with me. While I've studied Islam extensively from an academic perspective, this perspective is often out of touch with the lived experiences of believers. Having only spent three months exposed to Senegalese Sufism prior to beginning my research, the gaps in my understanding of this way of life are necessarily embedded in the analysis of my data. At issue here is the kind of rhetoric Smith criticizes—the problematic idea that research on religious communities becomes objective when it is imposed from the outside. To the contrary, I believe that my status as a non-Taalibe Baay weakened my research in many ways; living with an entirely different belief system than the Taalibe Baay women I interviewed, I had only my background research to inform the way I understood their responses to my questions. The potential for misunderstanding, then, might be greater than if I were a Taalibe Baay.

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[3] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 22.

[4] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 35.

My role as an outsider is further complicated by the subject matter of my research. Bound up with questions about the experience of performing *dhikr* is the role of the *tarbiya* in the lives of Taalibe Baay women. A spiritual training designed to guide disciples to a vision of God and initiate disciples into the *tariqa*, the *tarbiya* involves knowledge only accessible to those who have experienced it firsthand; the specifics of the practice remain a hidden from outsiders. The practice of *dhikr* necessarily refers back to the practitioner's experience of *tarbiya*, since it is *tarbiya* that establishes the first direct connection between the believer and God. Since my research centers on the practice of *dhikr* and the experiences associated with it, it inevitably approaches territory that non-Taalibe Baay are either ill-equipped or forbidden to navigate. I will touch on this throughout my presentation of findings as it comes up in the data, but for now it is important to note the general limiting effect of these circumstances on my research.

Keeping in mind all of the ways in which my positionality limits my research, it is important to think about ways to mitigate the potential harms incurred by these limits. Throughout the process of gathering data, this meant being clear about my intentions, leading with respect, being a good listener, and understanding that I was an outsider in each space I entered for my research. Throughout the process of analyzing my data, maintaining an awareness of my limits as researcher was perhaps even more crucial; in my presentation of findings, I rely heavily on the interview transcripts with the aim of presenting the experiences of my interviewees with integrity. Ultimately, despite the above-mentioned limitations inherent in my positionality as a researcher, I see the merits of conducting this research. Striving to come to an understanding across difference is undoubtedly important. With this in mind, I conducted my research by leading with an intention to learn about—and thus deepen my respect for—the beliefs and experiences of Taalibe Baay women.

Reflecting on my research in general, it is important that I frame my findings honestly by describing them as very preliminary observations. Given that I only spent one month on this research, and that I was only exposed to the topics with which my research is concerned three months prior to beginning, it would be unrealistic and even unethical to assume that my research might have any real impact on the existing discourse, let alone the way that Taalibe Baay women think about themselves. This points toward a central ethical dilemma of my research—I think about my research solely in terms of my own learning, and yet, I benefitted from the time, energy, and perspectives of the Taalibe Baay women I interviewed. Ultimately, acknowledging both of these truths becomes a matter of being transparent, which I aimed to do in this examination of my research ethics.

A Note on Language

It is important to bear in mind that the subject matter of this research can at times involve concepts and experiences that are inherently difficult to articulate. Across religious traditions, a wide range of terms may be used to describe God or experiences related to God. Throughout my presentation of findings, I strive to remain as close as possible to the language used by my interviewees. That said, language barriers may at times complicate this.

Methodology

Aiming to understand the internal experiences and self-perceptions of Taalibe Baay women, my research methods were entirely qualitative. Relatively unstructured, detailed interviews—ten in total—comprise the bulk of my primary data. I conducted interviews primarily in French; I conducted several in English, and several in Wolof with an English-

speaking translator present. Five of the interviewees were between the ages of 20 and 30, two were between the ages of 30 and 40, one was between the ages of 40 and 60, and two were over the age of 60. See the appendix for sample interview questions. Because of limited time and resources, I was unable to control for a variety of factors amongst my interviewees, including socioeconomic background, ethnic group, and level of commitment to religious community, all of which may have colored their responses to my questions. I also collected some data through the observer as participant method. This data collection consisted of attending the evening prayer at the mosque in Medina Baay in Kaolack, followed by the evening *wazifa*, and attending a Friday *hadra* of one of my interviewees in Dakar. Apart from this qualitative collection of primary data, I also examined relevant secondary sources in order to illuminate my research question, including general literature on Sufism and *dhikr*, as well as more specific literature on communities and practices of Taalibe Baay women in Senegal.

A Review of the Literature

While little research has been conducted on the particular experiences of Taalibe Baay women in the context of *dhikr*, literature on relevant themes—such as *dhikr*, the Niassen *tariqa*, the organization of the *daaira*, and the position of women in Sufism—is plentiful. In order to approach my central research question (How do Senegalese Taalibe Baay women engage with the practice of *dhikr*?) in an informed manner, I will address some of the historical context and arguments presented in these works. By contextualizing the above themes through an examination of the existing literature, I aim to frame my research as a comparison between firsthand accounts and scholarly works. In this way, I hope that this literature review will offer

one lens through which to understand the ideas and experiences of Taalibe Baay women that I include in my presentation of findings.

The practice of *dhikr* varies widely among Muslims. Broadly speaking, it is one of three main forms of Muslim prayer: "(1) *salat* (ritual prayer), (2) *du'a* (personal supplications), and (3) *dhikr* (prayer of the heart, recollection, or remembrance of God)."[5] Practically speaking, *dhikr* involves invoking the Name of God. It is performed both individually and in congregation, although the number and type of performances varies according to affiliation, as do the specific invocations used. Taalibe Baay, for example, are obliged to perform *dhikr* three times each day—two of these sessions are completed individually (*l'azim*), while one may be done in congregation (*wazifa*). Believers also attend a group litany (*hadra*)[6] each Friday, at which disciples chant *dhikr* in congregation. To these obligatory prayers, Taalibe Baay may add any number of invocations throughout the day.[7] In any case, the widely expressed aim of *dhikr,* as the name suggests, is to remember God—or to hold God in one's consciousness—by Naming Him.[8] Rosemary Corbett suggests that the aim of *dhikr* extends further than this; she acknowledges that *dhikr* serves to give thanks to and remember God, but she posits that the believer practicing *dhikr* ultimately "…take[s] steps to become a more Godly human being, and to eventually enter the state of constant *dhikr*, continually mindful of God's closeness."[9]

When we understand *dhikr* in this way—as a tool for moving the believer closer and closer to God—the practice takes on particular significance among Sufis. Indeed, Corbett notes

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5 Mohamed, "Muslim Prayer in Practice," 25.

6 Joseph Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40 (2010): 393.

7 Andrea Brigaglia et. al., "Two Exegetical Works from Twentieth Century West Africa: Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi's 'Radd al-adhhan' and Shakyh Ibrahim Niasse's 'Fi Riyadh al-tafsir,'" *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15, no. 3 (2013): 260.

8 Reza Shah-Kazemi, "A Qur'anic Theology of Prayer," in *Prayer,* ed. David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 15-16.

9 Rosemary Corbett, "Dhikr: Remembering the Divine," in *The Practice of Islam in America,* ed. Edward E. Curtis (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 37.

that the *dhikr* rituals of Sufi *tariqas* are among the most elaborate."[10] Since the role of *dhikr* in lived Sufi experience is undoubtedly infinitely complex and multiform, I am ill-equipped to provide an all-encompassing explanation of that role here. Briefly, though, it is important to note a clear link between Sufi ways of thinking and the aim of *dhikr*. Martin Lings notes the centrality of direct experiences of God for Sufis: "Every Muslim is obliged to believe in theory that there is no reality but the Reality, namely God; but it is only the Sufis…who are prepared to carry this formulation to its ultimate conclusion."[11] Here, Lings alludes to the Sufi commitment to truly knowing that God is one, on an experiential level. While the practice associated with this commitment differs by *tariqa*, it tends to involve, as Lings suggests, a stripping away of all of the distractions that obstruct one's view of the one true Reality, the one true God. In this sense, mystical experience of God—or direct connection between God and the believer—is characteristic of Sufism. When we take this into account, the extensive practice of *dhikr* within Sufi *tariqas* seems to align with the ultimate goal of the Sufi spiritual path, the goal of union with the Divine. I will address in my presentation of findings why it is that *dhikr*, among all forms of prayer, may take on this particular connotation of putting the believer in direct contact with God in Sufi *tariqas*.

Not only does *dhikr* take on particular significance in relation to Sufism at large, but it also develops a unique dimension in relation to the Taalibe Baay, or disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. In order to better understand the conception of *dhikr* specific to the Taalibe Baay, we should first consider, more generally, the doctrine and practices of this group of believers. Ibrahim Niasse's teachings are best known for the way in which they popularized mystical knowledge, or direct experiences of God. It is this aspect of Niasse's teachings that makes them

[10] Corbett, "Dhikr: Remembering the Divine," 36.

[11] Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Lahore, Pakistan: Suhail Academy, 1975), 64.

at once widely appealing and highly controversial. On the one hand, the "promise of universally available, direct, ecstatic, mystical knowledge of God…has attracted millions of disciples worldwide."[12] And yet, it is precisely this advertisement of the universal accessibility of God that has led many to question Niasse's legitimacy.[13] In any case, this aspect of Niasse's teachings certainly colors the way in which the Taalibe Baay practice their faith. At *hadra* meetings (group litanies, which involve chanting *dhikr,* or remembrances of God), disciples may be seen entering a state of *jadhb,* or ecstatic possession.[14]

Niasse's teachings fall into two categories, the *fayda* and the *tarbiya*.[15] Etymologically, the *fayda* describes a spiritual flood.[16] That is to say, the *fayda* represents the idea that, eventually and inevitably, Islam will spread around the world without being stopped, despite the factors preventing its spread. The *tarbiya,* on the other hand, refers to Niasse's unique method of spiritual training. It is difficult to define in practical terms because of the secrecy that surrounds it,[17] but after reading between the lines of a variety of sources, Seesemann tentatively defines it as

> …Spiritual training, dispensed by a qualified shaykh or spiritual master, based on a set of rules, meant to guide the aspirant during the journey (*suluk,* lit. 'wayfaring') on the Sufi path, with the aim of purifying one's self and achieving mystical union with and experiential knowledge of God.[18]

12 Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," 386.

13 Rudiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival* (Oxford University Press: 2011), 68.

14 Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," 394-395.

15 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival,* 67.

16 Rudiger Seesemann, "Three Ibrahims: Literary Production and the Remaking of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order in Twentieth-Century Sudanic Africa," *Die Welt des Islams* 49, no. 3/4 (2009): 309.

17 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival,* 70.

18 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival,* 71-72.

While my research will center neither on the *fayda* nor the *tarbiya,* the two doctrines form such an integral part of life for the Taalibe Baay that their experiences with *dhikr* are necessarily inextricable from these doctrines.

Central to both the discussion of *tarbiya* and that of *dhikr* is the concept of ego-death, referred to as "annihilation"[19] by Sufis. In the larger Sufi context as well as within Niasse's particular conception of the spiritual path, this experience of ego-death is a necessary precondition for union with God. Among Sufis in general, it is understood that "whoever is granted the state of permanent intimacy with and sustenance from God after having been annihilated has reached the ultimate goal of the mystical path."[20] Of course, the exact character of this "annihilation" followed by "intimacy with God" remains vague, since these terms point to states that can only be understood through direct experience. Niasse's particular conception of the spiritual path complicates this further by referring to multiple instances of annihilation before union with God, culminating in "the annihilation of annihilation."[21] While these states remain highly individualized and difficult to grasp from an external perspective, my interviewees continually alluded to them. In this respect, beyond understanding their basic doctrinal significance, it will be useful to think about the way these states play out on a larger, community scale.

Paul Heck suggests that the fact that Sufi morality is guided by mystical knowledge results in a social ethic of selflessness and, ultimately, universal kindness in Sufi communities.[22] That is to say, because of the Sufi understanding of mystical knowledge—direct knowledge of God—as true knowledge, direct experiences of God serve a compass for Sufi morality. Since,

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19 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival,* 94.

20 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival,* 93.

21 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival,* 94.

22 Paul Heck, "Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism,"*The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 2 (2006): 253-286.

according to Sufi doctrine, annihilation of the self necessarily precedes direct experiences of God, a shift towards selfless behavior occurs naturally in Sufi societies. Contrary to the isolating, antisocial effect that ascetic self-detachment can have, Heck clarifies that "…it is possible to speak of Sufism not as an introverted mysticism wherein one is detached from all observable reality but as extroverted…."[23] In this way, "refinement of the inner life"[24] actually creates Sufi communities in which "the behavior expected of…members works to foster self-detachment,"[25] which results in the promotion of "qualities of attentiveness to and service of others."[26] Ultimately, these tendencies guide many Sufis toward "an other-centered morality that extends to all creatures"[27] ; universal kindness becomes central to the Sufi social ethic. It remains important to avoid the fetishization or idealization of Sufism and Sufi communities, but the link that Heck draws between the Sufi pursuit of mystical knowledge and the Sufi morality of selflessness and universal kindness offers a useful framework for thinking about the ideas and experiences of my interviewees.

In order to better contextualize the discussion of the effects of the pursuit of mystical knowledge on the social dynamics of Sufi communities, it is important to consider an essential Sufi social structure, the *daaira.* A uniquely Senegalese mode of social organization, the *daaira* is

> A type of voluntary association organised by residents of a neighborhood, by workers in the same factory or business enterprise, or by students at university… [which] presides over evening meetings of prayer, devotional exercises, religious singing, discussions of the life and work of the brotherhood's founder, as well as involving lectures and sermonising.[28]

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[23] Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 260.

[24] Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 255.

[25] Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 271.

[26] Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 255.

[27] Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 258.

[28] Roy Dilley, "'Daaira,' Devotional Acts, and the Transformation of Space in Senegal, West Africa,"*Anthropos* (2011): 185.

While Roy Dilley's research on *daairas* explores them as organizations that facilitate acts of devotion and worship, he notes that they also occupy a central role in the social and political life of many of their members, serving to maintain "social cohesion," providing economic benefits to members, and establishing a hierarchy between shaykhs and disciples.[29] In the context of my own findings, it is useful to think about the *daaira* through all of these lenses—as locus of devotional practice, but also as an important community outside of this practice, making up the social fabric of the lives of many of its members.

Daairas take on especial significance when we consider that, according to Sufi doctrine, "moral truth lies fundamentally in a sustained relation with others no less than with God."[30] In the case of the *daaira*, the self-detachment that Sufis strive for results in an "attitude of service"[31] that ultimately translates to an understanding that devotion to others is devotion to God. In this way, the *daaira* becomes a crucial setting in which the Sufi pursuit of annihilation—and ultimately union with God—plays out.

Keeping in mind the above contexts of *dhikr*, Ibrahim Niasse's *tariqa*, and the function of the *daaira* in Senegalese Sufi societies, I'll now turn to literature that considers the position of women in Sufi societies. Before considering several scholarly arguments on this topic, I'll approach this debate through the specific context of the Taalibe Baay. While it may not always reflect the realities on the ground, much of the literature concerning Taalibe Baay women suggests that, because of Niasse's teachings, these women are capable of occupying unique positions of authority, ones not occupied by their counterparts in other *tariqas*. More specifically, Niasse's radical position that mystical knowledge of God is universally accessible[32] clearly

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29 Dilley, "'Daaira,' Devotional Acts, and the Transformation of Space in Senegal, West Africa," 186.

30 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 278.

31 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 273.

32 Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," 378.

places men and women on an equal footing in the spiritual playing field. Beyond this doctrinal suggestion of gender equality, Niasse himself called for more women to occupy visible positions of spiritual authority—throughout his life, he appointed numerous women to positions as *muqaddamas*, or spiritual guides, and he encouraged his daughters to write books and deliver speeches on the subject of Sufism.[33] Among the Taalibe Baay women with whom I spoke, Niasse's understanding of spiritual equality between men and women continually came up in conversation, but sometimes they noted a disconnect between these teachings and the lived reality in Taalibe Baay communities.

One scholar, for his part, sees the enduring influence of Niasse's teachings on the spiritual equality of the sexes in Taalibe Baay communities. According to Joseph Hill's research, some Taalibe Baay women understand themselves as uniquely positioned to guide their communities towards God. To begin with, Hill asserts that there is a natural link between women's nurturing dispositions and their ability to act as spiritual guides.[34] Metaphors of motherhood within the Taalibe Baay suggest that, while the role of public representation is left to men (the father figures), women "organiz[e] and suppor[t] [the spiritual family] behind the scenes."[35] In addition to the natural link between motherly nurturing and providing spiritual guidance, Hill perceives a "consonance between the hidden nature of Sufi knowledge and the interior dispositions of the pious women."[36] In the same way that mystical knowledge is not readily accessible or surface-level, pious Taalibe Baay women do not display themselves to the external world; they remain humble, quiet, and often physically hidden, just as knowledge of God does not immediately reveal itself. Hill implies that this consonance equips women with the

33 Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," 375.

34 Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," 400.

35 Joseph Hill, "Picturing Islamic Authority: Gender Metaphors and Sufi Leadership in Senegal," *Islamic Africa* 5, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 285.

36 Hill, "'All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood Among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," 400.

ability to guide others along the spiritual path in a way that is distinct from the guidance that men provide. I'll return to this notion of female energy as inherently distinct from male energy in my presentation of findings.

Other scholars are not as optimistic as Hill when it comes to the position of women in Senegalese Sufi societies. While Hill's work specifically concerns Taalibe Baay women, and Codou Bop and Amber Gemmeke concern themselves with Senegalese Sufi society in a broader sense, the three scholars represent distinct positions on the topic of women's rights within these societies. In contrast to Hill's position that Taalibe Baay women occupy positions of agency and power within their communities, Bop, a Senegalese Muslim herself, suggests that "a closer examination of the [Senegalese] brotherhoods as systems reveals that the large majority of women are actually marginalized."[37] While she agrees with scholars like Hill that Sufi women are able to "manipulate" and "accommodate [Islam] to their needs,"[38] she questions to what extent this overcomes the marginalization of these women within their *tariqas*. Ultimately, she conceives of the solution to women's advancement in Senegalese society as necessarily secular because, in her view, Islam—regardless of what the Qur'an actually says about women—has been too historically patriarchal for a significant advancement of women to come out of this tradition.[39] Taking a middle position between Hill and Bop, Gemmeke develops the thesis that Senegalese Sufi society does indeed allow women greater visibility and authority than other Muslim societies might allow,[40] but women in positions of authority must go to great lengths—

37 Codou Bop, "Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 4 (2005):1102.

38 Bop, "Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal," 1102.

39 Bop, "Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal," 1101-1102.

40 Amber Gemmeke, "Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 79, no. 1 (2009): 134.

like apparently possessing the qualities of a man—to assure their disciples of their legitimacy as figures of spiritual authority.[41]

Of course, the positions referenced above only represent a very preliminary glance at debates surrounding the position of women in Sufism and Islam at large. Ultimately, in the context of my findings, it remains of principal importance to consider how Sufi women understand themselves. How do they understand their roles within their communities? Are they satisfied with their positions in these communities? While I aim to contextualize their experiences within the existing body of literature, remaining true to the feelings they shared with me is my primary goal.

Moreover, with each of the themes I've explored in this literature review, my intention remains to foreground the thoughts of the Taalibe Baay women I interviewed, presenting these with integrity in order to understand to what extent these women's ideas align with the existing literature on the subjects we discussed.

Presentation of Findings

Based on the accounts of the Senegalese Taalibe Baay women with whom I spoke, I perceive an important link between the individual believer's practice of *dhikr* and the larger community's successful functioning. By dedicating themselves individually to this devotional practice, Taalibe Baay women commit to improving themselves on a number of levels internally, a commitment that tangibly affects their communities through the way they interact with others and approach their work as members of the *daaira*.

[41] Gemmeke, "Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge," 129.

In this section, I intend to explore this link between individual devotion and communal well-being by examining some of the thoughts and experiences my interviewees shared with me. To begin with, I'll address the practice of *dhikr*, first examining the unique relationship between this practice and *tarbiya* for the Taalibe Baay, then moving on to discuss the ways in which *dhikr* can fundamentally alter the internal substance of practitioners. Next, I'll explore the ways in which *dhikr* can be understood as functioning on the levels of the inner life and the outer life simultaneously. From here, I'll transition into a discussion of the ways in which the individual practice of *dhikr* extends its benefits to the community as a whole; I'll first contextualize this discussion with background on the structure of the *daaira*, and then I'll explore the distinct ways in which women interact with and support their *daairas*, as well as their communities at large. I'll conclude by examining some of my interviewees' perspectives on what I will refer to as "female energy" within the *daaira*.

The Practice of Dhikr

For nearly every woman with whom I spoke, practicing *dhikr* fundamentally changed the way she felt, thought about herself, and related to others. One cannot, however, speak of the experiences attached to *dhikr* as a Taalibe Baay without first addressing the *tarbiya*. For this reason, I'll examine the ways in which these women described *tarbiya* and its relationship to *dhikr* before delving into the specific experiences and changes associated with the practice of *dhikr*.

Dhikr and Tarbiya

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Niassen *tariqa*, *tarbiya*, or "spiritual training,"[42] is a relatively short, intense period of initiation in which the disciple, led by a spiritual guide,[43] recites specific formulas with the aim of achieving mystical knowledge of God.[44] Without experiencing *tarbiya* firsthand, though, it is difficult to know the exact character of the training. To begin with, *tarbiya* is by nature highly personal, given that its aim is to deliver the disciple to a direct experience of God. Apart from the personal nature of the training, though, it's also purposefully hidden from external view—whenever *tarbiya* came up in conversations with my interviewees, they prefaced their comments by noting that I would have to be an initiated Taalibe Baay to truly understand the process of *tarbiya* and its relation to *dhikr*. That said, these women still described their experiences to me in general terms. From these accounts, it's clear that the duration of *tarbiya* differs according to disciple; the process is over when the disciple achieves a direct experience of God. For some, this might require five days; for others, three months. The process involves isolation or near isolation, an ascetic lifestyle, and intense concentration.

While believers never revisit *tarbiya* after completion, the knowledge acquired during this training endures in their devotional practice in a powerful way. For the Taalibe Baay women with whom I spoke, performing *dhikr* inevitably refers back to the experience of *tarbiya*. While the exact language they used to articulate the relationship between *tarbiya* and *dhikr* varied, they all expressed the fact that, without *tarbiya* as a reference point, *dhikr* would lack meaning. I'll now turn to some of their perspectives.

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42 Seesemann, "Three Ibrahims: Literary Production and the Remaking of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order in Twentieth-Century Sudanic Africa," 310.

43 Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival*, 71-72.

44 Seesemann, "Three Ibrahims: Literary Production and the Remaking of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order in Twentieth-Century Sudanic Africa," 310.

If *tarbiya* is a first and crucial step along the Niassen spiritual path, *dhikr* is a practice—perhaps *the* practice—that allows one to continue along this path throughout one's lifetime. One interviewee, referencing her completion of *tarbiya*, said, "the process is finished, but we are not going to stop there."[45] To assume that the spiritual work of a Taalibe Baay is complete after *tarbiya*, she told me, is akin to arriving at the airport in a foreign country and declaring that you've explored the country and understand it. For her, *tarbiya* merely functions as the initial gateway to the spiritual path. To keep learning and improving, she told me, one must perform *dhikr*. In this sense, it is *dhikr* that allows a Taalibe Baay to continue the spiritual work first undertaken during *tarbiya*; at the same time, though, it is *tarbiya* that gives *dhikr* its substance. As another one of my interviewees noted, "it's the *tarbiya* that allows you to understand *dhikr* and to draw closer to God."[46] In this way, *tarbiya* opens the disciple's awareness to previously undiscovered knowledge that is necessary for progressing along the spiritual path, namely by practicing *dhikr* while keeping this essential knowledge in mind.

For many of my interviewees, the content of this knowledge involved an unmistakeable experiential understanding of God. "As soon as you complete your *tarbiya*," one of my interviewees told me, "God is no longer abstract. It becomes easier to think of Him; for that matter, it will be harder to not think of Him."[47] In this way, *tarbiya* triggers a crucial change in the consciousness of the disciple that makes it easy to concentrate on God during *dhikr*, something difficult to do before completing *tarbiya*. Performing *dhikr* with this direct knowledge of God, this interviewee told me, will begin to fundamentally change a person internally. In a similar fashion, several of my interviewees explained *tarbiya* as a moment of breaking through

45 Translated from French; my translation.

46 Translated from French; my translation.

47 Translated from French; my translation.

ignorance. One woman told me that, for her, "with *tarbiya*, everything changed."[48] Another noted that, "when you're done with the *tarbiya*, you will feel something inside that's going to tell you that you have never felt this way before." These women, as well as others, expressed that *tarbiya* radically changed the way they think; it allowed them to break with the past and "become a new person."

It is important to note the way in which the language these women used to describe *tarbiya* frames the discussion in terms of mystical knowledge. While none of them explicitly used the term "mystical" to describe their experiences, they continually alluded to a notion of entering into a new way of apprehending reality upon completion of the *tarbiya*. This experience of breaking through ignorance in order to discover a previously hidden, deeper sense of truth aligns clearly with Paul Heck's descriptions of achieving mystical knowledge. According to him, a mystical perspective is one that understands "the divine presence as the only true reality."[49] For Sufis, "since the self is the greatest barrier between believer and God," accessing mystical knowledge is largely a matter of cultivating self-detachment.[50] When the believer is successful in this pursuit of mystical knowledge, awareness opens and reveals the "hidden jewel of existence,"[51] God's presence. The women I interviewed spoke in similar terms about their experiences with *dhikr* and *tarbiya*, emphasizing the way in which each of these practices affords them a view of a deeper inner reality, not immediately externally apparent. Framing the discussion in this way—in terms of mystical knowledge as true knowledge[52]—points to a theme

48 Translated from French; my translation.
49 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 256.
50 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 273.
51 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 259.
52 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 262.

that will recur throughout my presentation of findings, the coexistence of the inner and outer life. I'll return to this theme after my discussion of *dhikr*.

When talking about the relationship between *dhikr* and *tarbiya*, many of my interviewees ultimately returned to the idea that, in order to fully understand *dhikr* in the way that the Taalibe Baay understand it—especially on an experiential level—one must have completed tarbiya. One of my older interviewees, a well-established and respected follower of Niasse, noted that people who perform *dhikr* after completing *tarbiya* will feel much different than those who perform *dhikr* without having done *tarbiya*, implying that those who haven't completed the *tarbiya* will not feel the same closeness to God that Taalibe Baay feel each time they perform *dhikr*. Another interviewee told me that the experience of performing *dhikr* is "inexplicable." All of these comments point back to the concerns I raised in my ethics section—as a non-Taalibe Baay, non-Muslim asking questions about a relatively guarded topic, it is inevitable that the information I have access to will be limited. That said, my aim is not to tease out the specifics of the experiences of *tarbiya* and *dhikr*, but to better understand the role that these practices occupy in the minds and lives of the Taalibe Baay women I interviewed.

Shifting our focus to the practice of *dhikr*, all of the comments of my interviewees addressing *tarbiya* remain relevant. While *tarbiya* functions as a kind of catalyst, a first real experience of God, *dhikr* offers disciples tools for returning to this direct link with the Divine, progressing spiritually through continual practice. In this sense, *dhikr* is perhaps even more significant to the lifelong Taalibe Baay mission of drawing nearer and nearer to God than *tarbiya* is, as it continues to shape disciples' spiritual consciousnesses throughout their lives.

Dhikr as a Vehicle for Internal Betterment

In conversations with my interviewees about their experiences with *dhikr*, my principal goal was to better understand how these women think about their personal relationships with the practice. From their responses emerges a clear trend—*dhikr* fundamentally changes the internal substance of a person, and it does so in several aspects. My interviewees described to me the moral changes accompanying *dhikr* that are promised by the doctrine, but they also described more complex internal changes having to do with their emotional well-being and their personal relationships with God. Each of these phenomena are best understood when we think about *dhikr*, for these Taalibe Baay women, as "a need, not an obligation,"[53] in the words of one of my interviewees. That is to say, while the Qur'an requires the believer to perform *dhikr*, the benefits abound such that the practice actually serves the believer. Framing the believer's relationship with *dhikr* in this way, I'll now turn to my interviewees' responses to examine the internal changes they associate with their practice of *dhikr*.

First and foremost, Taalibe Baay practice *dhikr* because God recommends it in order to purify the believer. Many of my interviewees spoke of the cleansing effect that *dhikr* has on the soul. The doctrine refers to *dhikr* in much the same way.[54] One interviewee described *dhikr*'s cleansing effect in metaphorical terms, claiming that it purifies the heart like iron turning to gold. In this sense, she said, a person who practices *dhikr* is very different from someone who does not, implying a difference in moral calibre. As part of this kind of moral elevation, my interviewees referenced the fact that *dhikr* rids the believer of sins. This aspect of *dhikr* in particular seemed like one that served the believer; several of my interviewees noted this as one of the primary benefits of the practice.

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53 Translated from French; my translation.

54 Corbett, "Dhikr: Remembering the Divine," 37.

Apart from these official, by-the-doctrine benefits of *dhikr*, though, my interviewees spoke extensively of other advantages to the practice that they noticed in their own experiences. To begin with, many of them defined the actual experience of performing *dhikr* as meditative and soothing—as an essential part of the day that puts them at ease and calms them. One of my interviewees, for example, shared that

> There were times, for me, that I was confused, and also nervous, very very nervous. I felt, in my core, that I got irritated too quickly.…And so, when that happens to me, that's when I know I need to do *dhikr*.[55]

When she begins to do *dhikr* more frequently again, she said, she finds that she feels "more serene" and "more calm," and she can "tolerate a lot of things."[56] For her, *dhikr* is like "medicine"; it centers her and uplifts her. Drawing on a similar metaphor, another interviewee described *dhikr* as a daily need: "It's like getting up, taking a bath, eating, going out to get some air; it becomes a need to get your bearings, to straighten yourself out, and to draw nearer to God."[57] As a daily practice, then, *dhikr* puts the practitioner at ease; when we consider that believers continue to practice *dhikr* everyday throughout their lifetimes, we can imagine that *dhikr* has a sizable positive impact on the overall mental well-being of a Taalibe Baay. In this way, according to one of my interviewees, there's no need for believers to think of the practice as a rigid religious obligation. "It's not like you're a prisoner when you do it,"[58] she told me. Instead, the believer can perform *dhikr* with lightness, approaching it as an ordinary, routine part of the day.

And yet, my interviewees also spoke of *dhikr* as a practice that can work in seemingly extraordinary ways. They made reference to *dhikr* as a tool for strengthening their individual

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55 Translated from French; my translation.

56 Translated from French; my translation.

57 Translated from French; my translation.

58 Translated from French; my translation.

connections to God and even, in some cases, as a means for achieving an experience of annihilation. When I asked about the different experiences of performing *dhikr* and *salat* (ritual prayer, prescribed five times per day), several of these women noted that, even though the two forms of prayer share the goal of worshipping God, *dhikr* is more powerful than salat. It penetrates deeper into the soul of the practitioner than salat does, one interviewee told me—and with all of the sin in our world today, she said, *dhikr* becomes an especially important practice. That said, it is possible, another interviewee told me, to "do *dhikr* with your mouth without it touching your heart,"[59] to perform *dhikr* in a detached, insincere sort of way. But, assuming that the Niassen disciple has completed *tarbiya* and practices *dhikr* with the genuine intention of drawing nearer to God, *dhikr* has the potential to establish a much deeper, more direct link between the believer and God than salat does. Explaining the way that dhikr continually reinforces and strengthens the relationship between the disciple and God, one of my interviewees noted that each time she performs *dhikr*, she thinks back to her *tarbiya*—the moment in which she first felt, for herself, the presence of God. For these Taalibe Baay women, it appears that *dhikr* is central to the spiritual path, a perspective that aligns with scholarly work on the subject.[60]

The "personal link with God" strengthened by *dhikr* appeared to be more vivid for some of my interviewees than for others. While all acknowledged the centrality of the practice within their larger commitment to God, one interviewee in particular—a respected member of the Taalibe Baay community who performs *dhikr* publicly at *daaira* gatherings—described the experience of practicing *dhikr* in terms of a dissolution of the self. She told me that every time she performs *dhikr*, both when she is alone and when she performs it for her *daaira*, she reaches

[59] Translated from Wolof.

[60] Corbett, "Dhikr: Remembering the Divine," 36.

a state of feeling that her own self is no longer present; she becomes possessed by God, her being dissolves into God's overwhelming presence. As this woman explained this to me, she spoke with an intensity that demonstrated how deeply felt these kinds of experiences are for her. *Dhikr*, in this way, seems to offer essential tools to Taalibe Baay for accessing the kind of direct knowledge of God that Sufis conceptualize as the ultimate aim of the spiritual path.

This woman's experience—particularly her description of feeling the self dissolve in the face of God—offers insight into this path. Paul Heck explains that the process of union with God "…climaxes in annihilation (*fana*) in God wherein one does not die physically but spiritually, with survival (*baqa*) now not the affair of oneself but the divine presence, God, as singular reality remaining in the inner chambers of the soul."[61] We can understand this spiritual death, this "annihilation," in the terms my interviewee used to speak of it—namely, that it involves a dissolution of the self in the face of a "divine presence." The concepts of *fana* and *baqa* are central to the Sufi understanding of the spiritual path at large, but in the specific context of the Taalibe Baay, these concepts are particularly central to the *tarbiya*. On the spiritual path of the Taalibe Baay, the *tarbiya* is the initial experience that "induce[s] a state of annihilation in the practitioner."[62] *Dhikr*, continually referring back to the *tarbiya*, has the power to return the practitioner to this state of annihilation. Given that the initial aim of my interviews was to better understand how Taalibe Baay women understand the role of *dhikr* in their lives, this link between *dhikr* and *fana* and *baqa* is particularly meaningful. Based on the kind of experience my interviewee recounted to me, it seems that within *dhikr* are the tools for deliverance to the aim of the spiritual path, the experiential affirmation that God is One.[63]

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61 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 259.

62 Brigaglia," Two Exegetical Works from Twentieth Century West Africa: Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi's 'Radd al-adhhan 'and Shakyh Ibrahim Niasse's 'Fi Riyadh al-tafsir,'" 260.

63 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 99.

Dhikr as a Means for Understanding the Inner and Outer Life

The Taalibe Baay women with whom I spoke made it clear that practicing *dhikr*, first and foremost, inspires internal changes. The content of these changes varied slightly from person to person, with some describing moral purification, others describing a state of calm mental well-being, and others still describing a deepening of their personal relationships with God, or even direct experiences of God. They all agreed, though, that these internal changes come to manifest externally, in one way or another. As one interviewee put it when I asked her about how her life changed after beginning the practice of *dhikr*, "It was more of an internal change and it's manifested by an external change, not the other way around."[64] On one level, these external changes are fairly basic—like beginning to wear the veil every day, instead of only every once in a while. On another level, though, these external changes can be quite complex. In our conversations, my interviewees repeatedly mentioned the ways in which *dhikr*, an individual, internally-focused practice, can have tangible effects on the energy of the community as a whole.

In this way, these women drew on a theme that appears frequently in Islamic thought, especially in Sufi thought—the concept of outer and inner lives. The outer life (*dhahir*) operates on the level of the material world; its contents are "the commands and prohibitions set down in divine law (*shari'a*)."[65] The inner life (*batin*),[66] on the other hand, while including the commands and prohibitions of the law, transcends them. It is the inner life that understands "the mystical path as a way inward, an interiorization of experience, a journey into one's own heart."[67] In this sense, the inner life becomes the plane on which the Sufi discovers God; it is by "look[ing] into

64 Translated from French; my translation.

65 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 255.

66 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 255.

67 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 190.

their own hearts [that they] find the source of knowledge."[68] While correct behavior in the outer life remains critical to a proper orientation towards the inner life, it is only through this "journey into one's own heart" that one discovers God on a direct, experiential level.

Speaking more broadly, the dichotomy of inner and outer offers a useful framework for talking about life as a Sufi—while the locus of truth is deeply internal, signs of this truth might appear on the external level. We can apply this framework to the way that my interviewees discussed their experiences with *dhikr*. On the one hand, they said, *dhikr* inspires internal changes on an individual basis, changes that can be quite personal. On the other hand, though, this individual practice clearly affects the way that the *daaira*—an organization operating on the level of the outer life—lives and operates. In the following section, I'll examine the ways in which some of my interviewees conceptualized the effects of their individual practice of *dhikr* on their *daairas* and on their larger communities. As part of this discussion, I'll also explore the ways in which worship can be understood on a communal level, relating this exploration to the particular work of Taalibe Baay women within their *daairas* and communities.

The Internal Shapes the External: Dhikr as a Practice for Community Well-Being

In order to address the ways in which my interviewees conceptualized their inner spiritual work as manifesting on the level of the community, I'll first offer some background on the *daaira* as a mode of social organization. After contextualizing the discussion in this way, I'll turn to some of my interviewees' perspectives on the relationship between individual piety and the energy of the *daaira* as a whole. Next, I'll extend the discussion to include the concept of work as prayer, a theme in Islamic thought that came up with many of my interviewees; I'll address

[68] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 189.

this concept both in the context of the *daaira* and more generally. Then, in relation to the theme of working for the community, I'll explore the ways in which my interviewees conceived of the specific role of women in their *daairas* and communities.

Daaira

We should briefly revisit the information on *daairas* detailed in the literature review. Roy Dilley describes *daairas* as "voluntary associations" comprised of members of a particular community that organize devotional events, in addition to serving as an important social, economic, and political structure in the lives of their members.[69] Unique to Senegalese Sufi societies, *daairas* draw on values common to Sufism at large. A Prophetic tradition declares that "the faithful is the mirror of the faithful."[70] Sufis refer to this sentiment as one of the founding principles for interacting with fellow believers, in whom they see "the reflection of their own feelings and deeds."[71] With fellow believers as a reference point, Sufis are better able to strive for purity, recognizing faults in themselves after recognizing them in their confreres.[72] Ultimately, in the context of the *daaira*, as well as the larger community, these values foster a sense of love and self-sacrifice.[73]

Throughout my collection of data, when I came into contact with *daaira*-run events, these values were apparent to me. Even as an outsider, I felt that displays of love and selflessness extended to me. And yet, it's important not to idealize Sufi communities. Allegiance to a religious community can certainly involve abuse.[74] For my part, though, as an outsider making

69 Dilley, "'Daaira,' Devotional Acts, and the Transformation of Space in Senegal, West Africa," 185.
70 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 228.
71 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 228.
72 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 228.
73 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 229.
74 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 257-258.

preliminary observations, the official values spoken of in the literature on Sufism were clearly present in the actual energy of the Taalibe Baay communities with which I interacted. Taking this into account, I'll now shift to a discussion of my interviewees' perspectives on the ways in which the practice of *dhikr* plays out on the level of the *daaira*. Ultimately, it seems that *dhikr* reinforces the lived practice of the very values upon which *daairas* are built.

Daaira as Manifestation of Inner Spiritual Work

Several of my interviewees noted a clear link between the individual's steady practice of *dhikr* and the development of the *daaira* as a space of love and well-being. They articulated two main forms of this link. To begin with, since all members of the *daaira* are focused on their individual relationships with God though their practice of *dhikr*, the *daaira* becomes a place where individuals can work on this together. Beyond this, the *daaira*, as a unit, naturally gravitates towards an energy of love and selflessness by virtue of the individual, interior effects that the practice of *dhikr* exerts on its members.

In line with the maxim, "the faithful is the mirror of the faithful," my interviewees spoke of the benefits of camaraderie among fellow Taalibe Baay. For one interviewee, sharing the common experience of *dhikr* felt particularly important in this context. All individually committed to practicing *dhikr*, she told me, fellow disciples are better equipped help one another, checking one another when necessary, encouraging one another through times of difficulty along the spiritual path. With this kind of relationship among members, the piety of individuals can have a ripple effect on the entire *daaira*, or even on the community at large. One of my interviewees recounted to me the experience of having multiple women in her community approach her, having noticed her piety, and ask for her guidance. She brought them into her

daaira, where they continued to benefit from her example as well as the examples of others. In this way, when the individual Taalibe Baay cultivates a certain energy within themselves—namely, through the practice of *dhikr*—it easily penetrates into the fabric of the entire community, inspiring others to do similar work, its effect thus having an exponentially greater and greater reach.

Because of the energy that *dhikr* inspires in individuals, on an internal level, the *daaira* becomes a space in which members naturally gravitate towards kind, selfless behavior. One of my interviewees conceptualized this phenomenon as follows:

> When we are good in ourselves, when we're good internally, we are good externally, absolutely. We don't have problems with people; we don't have the problems of hypocrisy and spitefulness and all of that. So, [*dhikr*] serves a purpose for us.[75]

For this woman, as well as others that I interviewed, it is the individual practice of *dhikr* that, in the first place, allows members of the *daaira* to be "good in themselves." Without *dhikr* then, the harmonious energy of the *daaira* would break down. Echoing this understanding of the *daaira* as a place of love and comfort, another interviewee spoke of what being with her *daaira* feels like: "[My *daaira*] is a little bit like my clock actually…even when I'm stressed, when I'm tired, when I'm depressed, if I go to see them and we talk, it comforts me."[76] From her account, it seems that there is a sense in which the *daaira* is a space of safety, of unconditional love. Yes, it is a streamlined organization, the hub of congregational devotional exercise, a place to learn—but it is also a space of solace. As an outsider, I certainly noticed a spirit of providing for others, of checking in on one another, of putting others needs before one's own. When I attended the Gamou (a week-long celebration of the Prophet's birthday) in Kaolack, I lodged with a local

[75] Translated from French; my translation.

[76] Translated from French; my translation.

family who went to extensive measures to provide for me and make me feel at home, going beyond the typical *teranga*[77] I had been accustomed to in my other interactions in Senegal. Ultimately, when we think about the place of *dhikr* within this community ethic of kindness and service, a clear link between individual devotional practice and community well-being emerges.

The way in which my interviewees spoke of this link echoes some of the scholarly and theological perspectives on the matter. Commenting on the strong community life present in Sufi societies, Annemarie Schimmel notes that, "one of the main rules valid for the Sufi is to do good for one's brother's sake, to prefer others to himself (*ithar*), to give up one's prestige for the sake of one's fellow beings."[78] To illustrate her point, she notes that service to others is one of the first steps along the spiritual path for any Muslim, but for a Sufi this attitude of service remains a duty throughout one's life.[79] The language Schimmel uses to describe this attitude of service is particularly important—it is not simply that Sufis develop a social ethic of serving others; they actually go so far as to "prefer others to [themselves]." In light of the connection Schimmel draws between this attitude of self-detachment and the spiritual path, it becomes important to consider the way in which the Sufi spiritual path—and even the Taalibe Baay spiritual path, more specifically—contributes to the development of this attitude.

Paul Heck suggests a direct link between the individual work of the Sufi spiritual path and Sufi morality on a broader social scale. He notes that "the way moral decisions are made…depends in part on how one locates true knowledge."[80] For Sufis, he continues, true knowledge is mystical knowledge, or direct knowledge of God. Heck argues that this orientation

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77 A quintessential Senegalese value, which foregrounds hospitality and providing for guests and outsiders.

78 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 229.

79 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 229.

80 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 262.

leads to a morality in which "the behavior expected of…members [of Sufi groups] works to foster self-detachment."[81] Ultimately, he suggests that there is an important link between the ascetic "self-detachment" that individuals pursue on the spiritual path and the ethic of universal kindness, which stems from lack of regard for oneself, in Sufi communities.[82] Schimmel and Heck's theories offer useful frameworks for understanding the perspectives my interviewees shared with me. Specifically in the context of *dhikr*, they drew a clear link—or sometimes implied a connection—between the internal benefits of individual devotional practice and external benefits to the community, particularly in terms of this attitude of service and care for others.

"C'est elle qui organise": Women in the Daaira and Work as Prayer

Given that I interviewed only women, our conversations about the effects of individual devotion on the community often naturally wandered towards the particular roles and experiences of women within their *daairas* and communities. In light of the fact that *dhikr* plays out on a community level through a shared attitude of selflessness and service, it's important to keep in mind that women already often occupy this space in their communities, serving as caretakers and organizers. In this way, the manner in which Taalibe Baay women seem to engage with their *daairas* and their communities meaningfully reflects the knowledge and behavior that emerges out of *dhikr*, namely, a knowledge of God and selfless behavior. Before delving into my interviewees' perspectives on this matter, though, I'll provide some context on "work as prayer" in Islam—a useful theme for framing my interviewees' perspectives.

81 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 271.

82 Heck, "Mysticism as Morality," 272.

The Qur'an urges followers of God to understand the importance of work. It repeatedly stresses that "Islam is a religion of worshipping the Creator, with an essential part of that worship being working for survival."[83] Beyond affirming that individuals should work for their own survival, though, the Qur'an also supports a vision of a society that shares the load in order to provide for all of its members.[84] It will be useful to keep these concepts in mind as we approach my interviewees' perspectives.

When I brought up the concept of work as prayer with my interviewees, opinions differed. Several expressed that they didn't perceive work and prayer as one and the same; when it's prayer time, they said, it's important to stop working and pray. Others, though, concurred that work could be considered a form of prayer. These interviewees still agreed that, at prayer time, it is important to pause your work and pray, within reason. Simultaneously, though, they understood work itself as a kind of worship. One of my interviewees shared with me an interaction she had with her shaykh, or spiritual guide:

> I said to my shaykh, "Fridays, I have class until 7:00pm, I never arrive on time to be there for the Friday *hadra*, and it makes me sad." And he said to me, "Don't worry about that; the class that you're taking [during the *hadra*], you're in the process of doing your own *hadra* there, too."[85]

Apart from this general illustration of the power of work to function as worship, this interviewee, as well as others, also referenced the specific role of work as prayer in the context of her *daaira*. Since everything that the *daaira* does is ultimately in service of Ibrahim Niasse, they told me, and everything disciples do for Niasse they by extension do for God, all work in the *daaira* is, in this sense, work for God. It's this context for thinking about work as prayer that becomes particularly interesting when we consider the experiences of women in the *daaira*.

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83 Islam Online Archive, "The Concept of Work in Islam," https://archive.islamonline.net/?p=17625.

84 "The Concept of Work in Islam."

85 Translated from French; my translation.

All of my interviewees described the role of women in the *daaira* as uniquely oriented towards making sure the *daaira* functions smoothly and effectively, and that all members are taken care of. While this kind of role takes on a unique dimension in the *daaira*—a community with specific shared goals—my interviewees noted that the same kinds of roles exist for women in their communities at large. Many of them conceptualized this role as analogous to women's roles within their families. As one of my interviewees phrased it, in the *daaira*, "it is [the woman] who anticipates, it's her who organizes, it's her who brings things together…it's her who takes care of the men." This emphasis on Taalibe Baay women as organizers, caretakers, planners, and generally motherly figures aligns with Hill's analysis of the Taalibe Baay community. Positing that West African Sufi women draw frequently on motherhood metaphors, especially in order to establish power in positions of authority,[86] Hill suggests that these women "organiz[e] and suppor[t] [the spiritual family] behind the scenes."[87] Several of my interviewees also used the language of motherhood in describing the roles of women within their *daairas* and communities, and when they didn't specifically use this language they described the role of women in terms of the duties we often associate with mothering, namely caretaking and organizing.

However, it is important to bear in mind that several of my interviewees insisted that the work of men and women within their *daairas* did not differ greatly. Ultimately, these women, as well as others, insisted on the absolute spiritual equality of men and women, a principle Baay Niasse often emphasized. And yet, all agreed, to varying extents, upon the different roles of men and women in the material world, alongside and not necessarily in conflict with this principle of

86 Hill,"Picturing Islamic Authority: Gender Metaphors and Sufi Leadership in Senegal," 297.

87 Hill,"Picturing Islamic Authority: Gender Metaphors and Sufi Leadership in Senegal," 285.

spiritual equality. In light of this, we can see a connection between the theme of work as prayer and the kinds of work typically expected of women in the *daaira*. It seems that women—organizing and supporting the *daaira* "behind the scenes," attending to all of the tasks that make a community run smoothly—are uniquely positioned to understand the value of worshipful work within their communities. This takes on another dimension when we think about *dhikr*—as a devotional practice that enhances an attitude of service within the community, the aims and effects of *dhikr* seem to clearly align with the actual, hands-on work of these women within their *daairas* and communities, which is ultimately work of selflessness and service.

In conversations with several of my interviewees, the topic of working for the community ultimately gave way to a discussion about uniquely female energy. While all of my interviewees insisted on the dissolution of the gender binary[88] in the face of God (and thus spiritual equality between men and women), several insisted that, in addition to performing different duties than men, women naturally possess certain qualities more easily than men. Particularly in the context of working for the *daaira* and the larger spiritual community, this kind of uniquely female energy, they told me, is related to maternal energy. One of my interviewees phrased it in the following way:

> The woman, and people can interpret this as a weakness, but I think it's more of a gentle strength, [she has the strength] to endure certain things, to be more understanding, to be more tolerant; I think these are more qualities of women than of men. Because, for example, it's true that a man can be very understanding, but…the woman, she is really called to be a mother; that motherly temperament…we find it more easily in a woman than in a man…that gentleness, that tenderness, I don't really find it in men like I can find it in women.[89]

[88] Within the Senegalese context, at least on the level of official discourse, speaking of gender necessarily means speaking of it in binary terms. Genderqueer identities are not recognized in this discourse.

[89] Translated from French; my translation.

This woman, as well as others I interviewed, stressed that this female "gentleness" and "tolerance" becomes especially important on the level of the community. It is women, one told me, that give advice to fellow community members; women are the foundation of a community's education by virtue of their role as mothers, another woman told me. In this sense, the "gentle strength" of Taalibe Baay women becomes particularly significant when we consider the common outlook held by members of the *daaira*, as well as the general well-being of the *daaira*. Returning to the discussion of the *daaira* as a context in which the powerful internal effects of *dhikr* play out through a communal attitude of selflessness, the role of women setting this tone within the *daaira* seems important to keep in mind. It is worth noting the consonance between this attitude of selflessness and the female energy of which my interviewees spoke.

It is important to briefly mention the links between the uniquely female characteristics articulated by my interviewees and the theme of the Divine Feminine in Islam. Famous Sufi poet Rumi touched on this Divine Feminine element when he said, "Woman is the radiance of God."[90] Dervish Laurence Galian offers further explanation of this concept:

> The Divine Feminine in Islam manifests…in the inner expression of the religion. The Divine Feminine is not so much a secret within Islam as She is the compassionate Heart of Islam that enables us to know Divinity. Her centrality demonstrates her necessary and life-giving role in Islam.[91]

The Divine Feminine, he says, affirms the infinite nature of God.[92] We might understand the comments of my interviewees through the lens of the Divine Feminine which, as a concept, extends beyond women themselves. Instead, it is an energy that anyone can access. While my interviewees noted that nurturing, motherly, gentle qualities are more easily found in women than in men, perhaps when we broaden the discussion to the level of the *daaira* and the larger

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90 Laurence Galian, "The Centrality of the Divine Feminine in Sufism," last modified 2003, 1.

91 Laurence Galian, "The Centrality of the Divine Feminine in Sufism," 16.

92 Laurence Galian, "The Centrality of the Divine Feminine in Sufism," 34.

community, Galian's understanding of the Divine Feminine becomes relevant. That is to say, when the *daaira* cultivates a communal attitude of selflessness and caring, it taps into this Divine Feminine aspect.

Ultimately, it is important to bear in mind that most of my interviewees, despite their articulations of the different practical roles of men and women, insisted on the absence of any substantive difference between the sexes. Returning to the discussion of *dhikr*'s effects on the community, it is important to avoid placing too much emphasis on the unique role of female energy in establishing a social ethic of selflessness and service. However, there are clearly meaningful links between the two phenomena.

Conclusions and Further Research

Taking my interviewees' perspectives as a whole, some meaningful trends emerge. We can see that *dhikr* is a practice that changes the individual internally, and that these internal effects radiate outward, coloring the energy of the *daaira* and the community at large. From the perspectives of the Taalibe Baay women I interviewed, we can gather that this community energy has an important relationship to the specific roles of women. As caretakers, organizers, and motherly figures within their *daairas* and communities, the work of Taalibe Baay meaningfully aligns with the selfless attitude of universal kindness that *dhikr* inspires in individuals.

Of course, as I've emphasized, it remains important to recognize the extensive limitations of my research, and ultimately, further research is necessary. If I have a chance to return to this work, I hope to interview more Taalibe Baay women, as well as Taalibe Baay men, to spend

more time with the community in Kaolack, and to spend more time interacting with the larger Taalibe Baay community.

Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

- What in your life changed since you started doing *dhikr*? / Qu'est-ce qui a changé dans votre vie depuis vous avez commencé à faire le *dhikr*?
- Beyond a basic understanding of obligation, why do you do *dhikr*? / Au-delà d'une compréhension basique d'obligation, pourquoi est-ce que vous faites le *dhikr*?
- Apart from having to be an initiated Taalibe Baay, is there a certain state of mind that you must enter before performing *dhikr* in order to perform it effectively? / À part la nécéssité d'être initié, est-ce qu'il y a un certain état d'esprit que vous devez entrer avant de faire le *dhikr* pour le faire efficacement?
- For you, how does individually done *dhikr* differ from *dhikr* done in a group setting? / Pour vous, comment est-ce que le *dhikr* qui est fait individuellement se différencie du *dhikr* qui est fait en congrégation?
- Do you think it's possible to keep your focus entirely on God while you do *dhikr*? How do you do it? / Est-ce que vous pensez que c'est possible de se concentrer entièrement sur Dieu pendant que vous faites le *dhikr*? Comment est-ce que vous le faites?
- What kind of work do you do to support your *daaira*? / Quelle sorte de travail est-ce que vous faites pour soutenir votre *daaira*?

- Many people within Sufism say that work can be a form of prayer—what do you think about this? / Beaucoup de gens dans le Sufism dit que le travail peut être une façon de prier—qu'est-ce que vous pensez de cette idée?
- Aside from the fact of spiritual equality between the sexes, is there anything unique about the role of women among the Taalibe Baay? / À part le fait d'égalité spirituelle entre les sexes, est-ce qu'il y a quelque chose d'unique chez le role des femmes dans le communauté Taalibe Baay?
- Who do you consider the most important and influential female figures in the Niassen *tariqa*? / Pour vous, qui sont les personnalités féminines les plus importantes et influentes dans le *tariqa* Niassen?

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